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ABSTRACT

In a study investigating whether middle school students can identify their own social groups, over 200 sixth- and seventh-graders were asked to name the kinds of groups to which they thought students in their school belonged, and to explain or define the groups. Data indicated that the students seemed to have no trouble in agreeing on certain labels, although labels and descriptors were often interchangeable. Phrases used to define groups provided insight into the thought processes of the participants. Many descriptors used for classification fell into two concrete categories concerning appearance and actions. Abstractions used in student responses were typical of early teen vocabulary and reflected experimentation with a developing values structure. Some descriptors seemed to result from biases that depended on perceptions of belonging or not belonging to a particular group. The most frequently named groups were the Populars and Nerds. Other identified groups included Smarts, Rowdies, Jocks, Unpopulars, Hicks and Cowboys, Weird-Funny, Heavy Metallers, and Preppies. One-third of students said they were Mediums, one-third selected positive-sounding terms, and one-third selected negative-sounding terms. Students' comments revealed that few had attained the stage of formal operations. (RH)

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SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Acceptance by peers is critical to the young adolescent. This young person seems to cling to the security of a perceived group identity, however unlikely, rather than take the chance of being rejected. It is possible that some of the manifestations of this peer pressure are a result of the level of intellectual develoment typical among transescents. Inappropriate social choices may be influenced by the tendency to define the scene in concrete terms rather than with more abstract concepts. This may be another instance of being caught in the middle--squeezed between the concrete perceptions of childhood and the abstract reality of the peer-controlled social organization of the typical high school.

Two middle level educators, Linda Corey and Linda Johnson, set out to see if middlers can identify their own social groups. Their emerging middle school lies about 50 miles from the geographic center of the nation in a town of approximately 5000 within a school district that extends many miles in every direction. The town is the site of a summer motorcycle rally that draws thousands of people from all over the country. It's a very *in-the-middle* middle school.

Over 200 sixth and seventh grade participants were first asked to name the kinds of groups to which they thought everyone in the school belonged. At the same time they were asked to explain or define the groups named. (See Figure 1) The students seemed to have no trouble in agreeing on certain labels although the labels and descriptors were often interchangeable.

The phrases used in defining the groups provide interesting insights into the thought processes of the youngsters involved. Many of the descriptors used for classification divide into two concrete categories -- appearance and actions. The abstractions used were typical of early teen vocabulary and

reflect experimentation with a developing values structure. It must be noted that some of the descriptors seem to result from biases that depend on perceptions of belonging or not belonging to a particular group. (See Figure 2)

The most named group was the **Populars**. Over three-fourths of the students agreed that this group exists. There was not, however, strong agreement on the group's characteristics. The Populars are nice and have friends, but may be stuck up or show off. They were also thought to be attractive, good students, and cool.

Nerds are another identifiable group to two-thirds of these students. They were described as real stupid or dumb, weird, ugly, and as not trying to fit in. However, they may also be people that never get into trouble and make all the right choices.

At least one-third of the students named **Smarts**, **Mediums**, **Rowdies** and **Jocks** as groups that they see. Smarts know it all, are nice, but get good grades and brag about it. Mediums are nice, normal, get average grades, are liked by everyone, but are not too popular. Rowdies are both in trouble themselves and trouble makers. They smoke, pick fights, are bullies, and can often be identified by long hair and an unkempt appearance. Jocks are tough and good in whatever sport occupies their time.

Other labels mentioned by some of the students were unpopulars, hicks and cowboys (live on ranches and farms), neutrals (popular with people in all groups), weird-funny (like to be weird for the fun of it), heavy metallers, cool hot shots (think they're awesome), smokies (smoke in the alley), weirdos (spaced out), jerks, preppies, freestylers (have all kinds of moods), and harmless (don't smoke or drink).

Having named the groups, each student was then asked to indicate the group to which he or she belonged. Approximately one third of the middlers

said they were Mediums. The next most selected groups were at the two extremes--Populars and Unpopulars. About one third selected positive sounding terms such as Populars, Medium Popular, Smart and Cool. While another third labeled themselves with negative sounding words such as Unpopulars, Nerds, Jerks and Rowdies. (See figure 3)

When asked if you could move between groups, the sixth graders seemed to think it far more possible than did the seventh graders. But all age levels indicated that they were relatively satisfied in the social group to which they perceived they belonged. (See Figure 4)

The students were also asked if family life style would have a bearing on the group to which they might belong. The comments again reveal how few of them were to the point of formal operations.

<u>From those who said yes</u>:

--If you're rich or upper middle class you have nice clothes and belong to popular groups
--Depends on where you live
--If your family is cool, you are cool
--If your brothers and sisters belong to one group you probalbty will too
--Yes, your family lifestyle usually indicates what your personality is like
--If you fight with your parents you might get in trouble in school and become a rowdy
--If you're "country" you probably won't be in with the popular group or the jocks
--Yes, the way your parents act
--Yes, the teacher's kids are in the popular group
--Sometimes it depends if you are rich or not. Mostly it's on your attitude and looks
--You get put into groups by the impression the kids your age have of you and it starts usually in kindergarten
--My parents are sporty and they expect the best that I can do

From those who said no:

--No, it doesn't matter what your family is like, it's the way you are
--I have a normal family--they're close and share
--Kids my age influence you
--My grandma wants me to be a nerd but I'm not
--They don't care
--If they're cool, you're cool

The level of intellectual development influences the social choices made by early adolescents because of their need to spell out things in concrete forms. They therefore look at appearance and actions and have difficulty in generalizing to abstract concepts. This emerging use of abstractions leads to nonstandard definitions of words such as dumb, stupid and weird.

Too often parents and teachers assume that students are ready to make social decisions and are then disappointed by the basis for these decisions. Do we ask too much of the middler? Do we insert them into inappropriate social dilemmas? We tend to accept immaturity in emmotional development for this age group. We need also to accept the middle years as a transforming period in intellectual processes. Just as adult emotions are impossible, so is adult reasoning.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. List some of the groups you think are present in our school.
2. What are the people like that are in each group?
3. Can you move between groups? (from group to group)
4. Does family life style indicate what group you might belong to? How?
5. What group do you think you belong to?
6. Are you satisfied there?

Figure 1

DESCRIPTORS FOR GROUPS

Phrases that had to do with Appearance

pretty, ugly, dress neat, glasses, fat, buck teeth, short, speech problem, strong, sweat pants, big, collars up, nice hair dos, show offs, shaved hair, washed hair, not washed hair, clean clothes, wear trench coats, have greasy hair, t-shirts and blue jeans,

Phrases that had to do with Actions

call names, get good grades, by themselves, don't try to fit in, quiet, self-confident, out-going, tease nerds, act dumb, brag, act cool, pick fights, push kids around, chew, drink, act tough, don't get work done, smoke, no socializeing, sit there all day, stay out of fights, don't smoke and drink, snotty, gossip about you, steal things, always in detention, not polite, start fights, tattle tale

Phrases that had to do with Abstractions

nice, cool, smart, dorky, read stupid, dumb, weird, scientific, jerks, greedy, bratty, rich, mean, have all kinds of moods, athletic, like to be weird for the fun of it

Figure 2

GROUPS SELECTED BY STUDENTS

Mediums	28%
Populars	16%
Unpopulars	8%
Nerds	6%
Jerks	6%
Medium-Popular	6%
Smart	4%
Cool	3%
Rowdies	3%
None	4%
Don't Know	3%

Answers chosen by at least 1% of respondants

Figure 3

RESPONSES

Question	Grade	Yes	No	Uncertain
Can you move between groups?	6	67%	22%	11%
	7	38%	50%	12%
Are you satisfied in your group?	6	80%	13%	7%
	7	96%	4%	

Figure 4